The Program Chair

The Program Chair (PC) is a unique office in that its proper execution is one of the most essential functions of the ASR, yet the incumbent is not evaluated either by Council or the membership as to his/her fitness for the position. Rather, he/she is appointed by the newly elected President-Elect, with the only qualification that he/she already be a member of the ASR. The PC must be a person who is extremely sensitive to detail, possesses excellent communication skills, and works well as a part of a team to meet specific goals.

Virtually on the heels of his or her election, the President-elect appoints a PC to serve what amounts to a two-year term. He/she will attend the meeting the year prior to the Annual Meeting which he/she will organize, and then again the year during which he/she is PC.

Shortly after the meetings of the year *prior* to when the President-elect takes office (i.e., about 22 months before the meeting for which the PC is responsible), the PC should contact the ASA requesting its deadlines and application procedures for joint ASA/ASR session proposals. While the actual negotiation of these sessions is conducted at the Presidential level, the PC needs to be aware of the process and ensure that he/she is taking all the necessary steps in a timely manner. In the past, these deadlines have officially been in November--a full 20 months prior to the actual meeting. In actuality, however, joint session proposals may be accepted by ASA as late as February (16 months before the meeting). Still, it is important to know what the deadline is, find out the correct format for joint session proposals, and publicize the opportunity to ASR membership, if possible. The PC and the President-Elect may wish actively to solicit such proposals. In any case, the PC and the President-Elect will collate the final proposals and forward them to the ASA office in time for ASA's deadline. (Although ASA has traditionally required that everyone on its program be ASA pre-registrants, in recent years, ASR has negotiated an understanding with ASA that *at our jointly sponsored sessions*, session participants and attendees need be members of either ASR or ASA, but not both. Anyone invited to participate in a joint session should be made aware of this requirement and accede to it at the outset.)

By July 1 of the year that the President-Elect will take office, he/she and the PC should have determined a theme for that meeting and prepared a "Call for Papers," which will first be distributed at the annual meeting when the President-Elect takes office. The Program Call elaborates the theme, suggests relevant topics for thematic papers, and lists deadlines for and places to send the abstracts and proposals. Except as otherwise counseled by Council, these should follow the same format from year to year, hence prior years' calls serve as concrete models. The Program Call should be transmitted in pre-final draft to the Executive Officer (EO) for editorial suggestions before July 1. Once the document has been finalized, the EO takes primary responsibility for its duplication and circulation. This is not, however, to say that the PC may not on his or her own initiative pursue publicity in other venues of his/her choosing. Such publicity should be coordinated with the EO only to the extent to ensure that no duplicate mailings are occurring. The EO does not send copies of the Program Call to associations beyond those specializing in the social scientific study of religion.

By the annual meeting at which the President-Elect takes office, he/she should have chosen the Paul Hanly Furfey lecturer. The by-laws anticipate that the President-Elect will consult with both the PC and the EO when making this selection.

Both the ASR meeting at which the President-Elect takes office and the RRA/SSSR meetings in the fall thereafter are prime venues at which the PC should work to develop the program. If the PC relied only on submissions the program would be smaller, less thematic, and less distinctive. The key to gaining wide participation, highlighting the theme, and setting the program lies in initiating special sessions and events that would not otherwise occur, including but not limited to the following:

Thematic sessions: Papers or presentations built around a specific topic or issue bearing on the theme, with participants asked to prepare something defined either by them or the PC and President.

Book (or "Author-Meets-Critics") sessions: Review and critique of recent books of major interest, which need participation of both authors and critics, and support from the publisher in terms of review copies for the critics. Beginning in 2005 we made a decision not to accept self-nominated books. Book review sessions should come either from the PC/President's initiative or from 3rd parties, who would also put together the session. In 2001 an authors' reception was innovated as a result of an increased number of Author-Meets-Critics sessions. This was a popular event, but funding for this event must come from authors and publishers and be developed by the PC in conjunction with the EO. This reception has not been held since 2003, but in future years, the Program Committee should consider inserting into the program schedule a morning coffee break and an afternoon coffee break during which members can peruse recently published books at the Book Exhibit while enjoying coffee and refreshments.

Special Sessions with Outside Participants: Presentations by nonmembers or non-scholars on topics of special interest because of timeliness, geographic location of the meeting, thematic relevance, application of knowledge, etc. If they are invited, non-scholars should be included because they offer a specific *competence* rather than a "position." Council has more than once considered and rejected the idea that sessions should be offered wherein devotees of particular religions or religious positions should be invited to present their beliefs or "points of view" on issues. Either the PC or the President may invite outside participants to present at these special sessions.

Joint Sessions: With such groups as ASA, Society for the Sociological Study of Mormonism, Association for the Study of Jewry, ISA RC-22, SISR, SSSP, etc. Some of these take longer lead time than a year (like ASA, which the President-Elect must initiate early in his/her term), but all need some advance planning and initiative. The PC should consult with the Chair of the International Liaison Committee toward joint sessions with RC-22 and SISR, and call upon him or her to initiate these contacts. Not all will work out every year, but to have some each year is stimulating both intellectually and organizationally.

Receptions and Food Functions: The Welcoming Reception, Presidential Reception, New Members' Welcoming Breakfast, and Furfey Reception are standard program events that are

facilitated by the EO, with assistance from the Local Arrangements chair. In recent years, the Welcoming Reception has been supported by Brill. We look to the President and Local Arrangements chair to obtain outside funding to assist in underwriting these functions.

If additional receptions/functions are proposed, these either need to be (1) brought to Council at the time the President takes office or (2) supported by outside funding. It would be primarily the responsibility of the PC and/or President to do this additional development work. Responsibility for arranging these events with the hotel remains with the EO. Because hotel space is sometimes limited, it is important that these events be guaranteed as soon as possible.

The more of these special activities that can be worked out in the Fall, prior to the arrival of general submissions, the farther the PC is ahead in his/her work.

In addition, during the Fall, the PC should learn who the coordinators are for the ASA Section on the Sociology of Religion sessions and for the general ASA Religion sessions (if any), as well as whether there are any special sessions on Religion. (These can be discerned by checking the ASA Program Call, usually issued in early November.) The PC should contact all of these people and encourage them to refer papers they reject to ASR for consideration on our program.

The Program Construction Process

There are two very different kinds of tasks involved in constructing the program. One centers on the intellectual content of the program; this has two subparts--what you include and how all its parts are arranged together. The second task is administrative; it, too, has two subparts--getting all the people to fulfill the requirements for inclusion on the program, and then producing the Preliminary Program, which is published online, and the final Program, which is printed immediately before the Annual Meeting. Although the first function belongs primarily to the PC and the second primarily to the EO, the two persons work together to ensure that these tasks are accomplished.

There are also two kinds of submissions for the Annual Meeting: session proposals, which have an earlier deadline and are submitted directly to the PC by email; and paper proposals/abstracts, which have a later deadline and are submitted through the Members-Only area of the ASR website. Session proposals tend to make PCs happy because they seem to require less work and to be more likely to have a common theme. However, they can cause frustration if the participants listed in the session turn out to be not as committed as the proposer thought.

How we deal with session submissions:

When the PC receives a session submission, he/she should make a quick decision as to whether or not it has any relevance to what the ASR is all about; that is, is it likely ever to be included on the program? If not, then write back and reject it, kindly but firmly. If the submission looks plausible, then check to make sure it follows the format described on the website. If it doesn't, request a re-submission. If it does, go ahead and decide whether to accept it on the program.

It's good for the PC to send people letters of acceptance of their session proposals as soon as possible after their submission so they can begin to make arrangements to attend the meeting. These email letters should be directed to the session organizer and all the participants and cc'd to the EO.

The PC's acceptance letters should communicate that the session has been accepted for the program contingent on each participant:

1) Submitting his/her abstract through the Member Portal of the ASR website by April 30, in order to verify his/her membership in the Association, as described in the instructions on the website;
2) Registering for the Meeting on the ASR website by July 1, to guarantee his/her place on the program;
3) Being willing to be available during any of the time slots that the Program Chair may assign the session during any of the days of the conference.

It's important that the PC mention these things in initial letter of acceptance to avoid any problems down the road. It can become a nightmare for the PC if individuals start requesting a certain session time based on their personal schedules.

The membership rule: In general, anyone who submits anything, and anyone who presents anything, must be an ASR member. The two principal exceptions are: persons in jointly sponsored sessions, who are members of the other organization, and persons who are coauthors with a member. *Rare* exceptions are made, principally for book panelists or discussants who are *not* in sociology of religion or a cognate field, whose presence nevertheless makes sense in view of the book reviewed or the profile of the meeting (e.g., a senator, mayor, governor, ambassador, judge, etc.). Exceptions are made by the PC and EO in consultation with each other and the President, if necessary. These exceptions are in all cases limited only to participation in the specific session in which the exceptee is involved. Only the Furfey lecturer gets free registration for the entire meeting without reference to the membership requirement. These same rules apply to registration for the meeting, mutatis mutandis (see below).

How we deal with individual paper submissions:

Prospective meeting participants now submit their abstracts through the Members-Only area of the ASR website. This ensures that everyone who submits an abstract is a member of ASR, and enables the PC to evaluate each abstract individually online. The website automatically informs prospective meeting participants that their abstract has been received, but the PC will want to begin reviewing individual abstracts as they come in so acceptance letters can be sent as soon as possible after submission.

Within the Administrative Panel of the ASR website, the PC can enter into the "Manage Meetings & Abstracts" section to view a listing of all "Meeting Abstracts," and then while viewing each abstract decide whether to designate it as "Approved" or "Pending Availability." Obviously, no abstracts should be approved that do not meet the requirements described on the

website: a 300-word abstract describing the author's research question(s), research methodology, and preliminary results.

The PC can decide whether he/she wants to communicate acceptances informally through a quick email (it's easy to click on the email address of each submitter on the "Meeting Abstracts" page of the website) or through a mass email distribution using the Constant Contact software (the EO can help with this task), or both. Acceptance letters should communicate that the paper has been accepted for the program contingent on the applicant:

1) Registering for the Meeting on the ASR website by July 1, to guarantee his/her place on the program;
2) Being willing to be available during any of the time slots that the Program Chair may assign the session during any of the days of the conference.

In general, ASR discourages multiple submissions from the same person. For this reason, if an individual tries to submit a second abstract through the ASR website, he/she will receive the message:

> **Abstract Already Registered.**
> Your abstract for the meeting has already been submitted. Please contact the Program Chair to update your abstract or to request permission to submit a second abstract.

If the PC grants permission for someone to submit a second abstract, that abstract should be sent directly to the PC through email. Upon receiving the second abstract, the PC should ask him/her to prioritize his/her submissions in case it is not be possible to include more than one on the program. The EO will also need copies of the abstracts the PC accepts so these abstracts can be listed in the printed program.

Although the McNamara award is separate from program participation, the PC is asked to remind students who submit paper proposals of the award and encourage them to submit something to the committee by the deadline. This is not a requirement, but it usually helps to generate a slightly larger group of papers for the McNamara Committee to assess.

Once all of this winnowing has occurred, which would ideally be by mid-May, the PC constructs sessions from the individual submissions, and then organizes the whole into the Preliminary Program. Throughout this time, the PC is responsible for keeping everyone informed about the organization of the meeting. People become antsy if they feel their materials have fallen into a black hole.

Things to keep in mind:

1) Our Annual Meeting is scheduled over two days during which we have 5 time slots per day for regular paper sessions or Author-Meets-Critics sessions. Because we typically have access to 5 rooms for "breakout sessions," we will be able to run 5 sessions concurrently during each time slot, which means that we will be able to accommodate approximately 50 sessions throughout the Meeting (2 days X 5 time slots X 5 rooms=50),

not including the joint sessions that will be held in the ASA hotel. If we have 3-5 presenters per session, that means we can accommodate anywhere between 150-250 presenters. However, it's preferable to have neither as few as 3 papers in a session (because someone might drop out) nor as many as 5 papers (because if everyone shows up, it makes for a really long session). So, the ideal session size is 4 papers. We do not have to fill all 50 of the session time slots. In fact, if we don't need that many, we can make room in the program for coffee breaks in the Book Exhibit room.

2) Arranging free papers into sessions may initially seem a daunting task, but if the PC finds some way to spread out what he/she has, they usually congeal fairly quickly around common themes/theoretical orientations with only a few scattered around the edges. (When I was PC, I printed out all of the abstracts on little slips of paper and then organized them into piles based on common themes.) The ones that don't congeal usually call for creative titling, but the "Pot pourri" session title should not be used more than once.

3) Once individual abstracts have been sorted into sessions based on theme or theoretical orientation, the PC should solicit volunteers to serve as Conveners of those sessions. If a particular session has only three papers, the PC may also wish to ask someone with expertise in the topic area to serve as a discussant of the papers in the session. The convener of a 3-paper session should not also be the discussant. We would like to have as many of the conveners and discussants in place as possible by the time the Preliminary Program is posted on the website in early- or mid-June.

4) We do not accept 2-paper sessions. And, in general, when a 5-paper session emerges, it's sometimes preferable to solicit a 6th paper, and then create two 3-paper-plus-discussant sessions.

5) It is important that the PC understand that the program is an economic as well as intellectual venture for the ASR and that we need to work to maximize hotel registration. The ASR *never* makes money on our annual meeting. The goal is to keep our losses within bounds. Thus, if we have space, for example, we try to accommodate late submissions. But we build our program with what we have more or less at the deadlines (giving a week or so for the habitually dilatory).

6) As the PC lays out the program, he/she needs to think about the potential "draw" of different sessions so that they coincide with this room layout throughout the day. We do not have evening sessions. It is also important not to schedule two sessions on the same or closely related topics at the same time.

7) *The Preliminary Program should be completely ready for posting to the ASR website by the end of May.* Our contracts with hotels require submission of the preliminary program to them by this date, or they may reallocate meeting room space to the eventual detriment of our program. In addition, members often need to submit travel requests within a fixed-term before the end of their fiscal year.

8) All participants are expected to preregister for the meeting on the ASR website by July 1 (with the exception of the Furfey lecturer, who comes as our guest). Registration for the conference as a whole is never waived. We will waive registration for invited participants who are coming for a single-session only, but only for that session: that is, they come in for the session and leave again. They receive no registration badge, materials, etc. (Registration may, of course, be paid for by a third party.)

9) Unfortunately, the principal reason for delinquent preregistration is that the person has decided not to attend the meeting (but doesn't tell the PC). What this means is that the PC does much more backing and filling than he/she may at first blush expect. The Preliminary Program really is preliminary, and quite a bit of restructuring goes on between the two. This is probably the most frustrating part of the PC's job, and more than one PC has finished his/her term recommending that we keep a black list of those who back out on us.

Finances

Because the program is an economic as well as an intellectual endeavor and the annual meeting never makes money, we ask that wherever possible the PC act so as to have his/her institution absorb the costs and time associated with his/her work. Where this is not possible, the EO will reimburse costs for supplies and/or limited administrative assistance. Receipts are required.

The PC should not make any commitments for expenditures without consulting the EO, who manages the annual meeting budget and finances. In general, participants should bear costs for special services they desire, such as audiovisual, food services, etc., unless the EO gives specific prior approval.

Reports

The PC normally makes four reports: The first is at the first Council meeting of year prior to that for which he/she has program responsibility. This comes in the form of the "Call for Papers." While the Call is also first circulated to the membership at this time, it is subject to review and revision by Council. This happens rarely, but it has happened.

The second report is made by the PC to the first Council meeting of the year when he/she is responsible for the meeting. It is normally written and details the nature of the program construction process by addressing, as appropriate, successes, failures, and frustrations. It also should provide some quantitative assessment of program participation.

The third report is made by the PC to the general business meeting of the Association. It is a very brief oral report that should partially reprise the report presented to Council, but it also gives a progress report on the meeting itself.

The final report is an oral report to the Council meeting at the close of the meeting for which the PC has had responsibility. This partially reprises the progress report made to the business meeting, but it also may make a deeper assessment of positive outcomes and more specific suggestions for future PCs.